

Witch King

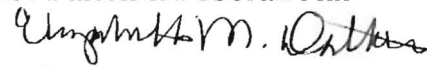
An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

Jessica Berg

Thesis Advisors

Beth Dalton & Deborah Mix



Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

March 2014

Expected Date of Graduation

May 2014

SpCon
Undergrad
Thesis
LD
2489
24
2014
347

Abstract

Witch King seeks to combine my undergraduate studies with my aspirations to become a novelist. The resulting creative project is comprised of the first seven chapters of the novel *Witch King* and a detailed author's statement, which both showcase the skills I developed in creative and critical writing and the knowledge I gained as a student of both literature and, briefly, anthropology. The following is a brief summary of the novel:

When Sydney Armistead, the discontented daughter of a prominent politician, finds an amulet in the river behind her home, she is transported to another realm, where she meets a runaway prince who refuses to tell her his name. With no choice but to follow him, she must learn to navigate the complicated social and political environment that keep the realm's two opposing kingdoms locked in an uneasy standstill. The more she learns, the more it becomes clear that her royal traveling companion threatens to disrupt the strained peace between the kingdoms. Swayed by her own resentment at the political forces controlling her life at home, she decides to help the prince escape his unfortunate fate, and they must figure out how to liberate him without destroying the social fabric that keeps the realm from dissolving into perpetual war.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank both Beth Dalton and Dr. Debbie Mix for advising me through this project. Both of them helped me to put together different aspects of this thesis and pointed me to helpful resources that could aid me in its construction. Beth Dalton was particularly helpful during my writing process, and without her, I would have floundered. Her guidance, support, and encouragement have done more to help me find the confidence to pursue my dream of being a writer than I can put into words. Dr. Debbie Mix was also extremely supportive, and her help in finding resources was instrumental to my understanding of the fantasy and young adult genres. Both of these brilliant women were fantastic advisors, and I could not have gotten this far without them.

I would also like to thank Chris Kozak for his help in editing the novel portion of this thesis. It was wonderful to get such constructive feedback from a peer, and his support encouraged me to push forward.

Table of Contents

Author's Statement.....	5
Introduction.....	5
Background	6
Summary	8
<i>Conception.....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Present Version</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Political and Magic Systems.....</i>	<i>14</i>
Process	16
<i>Research Process.....</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Writing Process.....</i>	<i>21</i>
Discussion	27
<i>Genre.....</i>	<i>27</i>
<i>Themes and Characters</i>	<i>33</i>
Conclusion.....	40
Works Cited	43
Appendix	45
Witch King	46
Chapter 1	46
Chapter 2	57
Chapter 3	68
Chapter 4	81
Chapter 5	100
Chapter 6	116
Chapter 7	137

Author's Statement

Introduction

My greatest aspiration has always been to become a successful novelist, yet for my undergraduate studies at Ball State University, I decided the study literature instead of creative writing. I had my own reasons for choosing my area of study, which I do believe will serve my ultimate goal of becoming a novelist, but my decision has prevented me from regularly indulging my creative impulses and taking full advantage of the opportunities afforded to creative writing students on university campuses. Despite these hindrances, I have been developing many stories in my head over the past few years, often incorporating new ideas and philosophies as I learned about them in class. Now, in my final year, I felt it would be most beneficial to me and to others who share my passions to unite my studies and my aspirations into one final project.

To conclude my studies as an Honors student of English Literature at Ball State University, I embarked on a creative project to write a novel of my own, entitled *Witch King*. Writing for my Honors senior project has provided me with the opportunity to engage with other writers, particularly my thesis advisors, and has allowed me to apply many of the concepts of good writing and story that I have explored as a literature student. On a more personal note, it has given me the time and motivation to breathe life into a project I have been planning for several years now. *Witch King* is a young adult fantasy novel conceived during my junior year of

high school after a bizarre dream. It has undergone a number of changes since its conception, becoming far more complex as a result of my college studies than it was when I first created it. The complexity of *Witch King* and its close relationship to my studies are the main reasons I chose to write it for my thesis instead of the other several works I have outlined for completion at a later date. Only the first seven chapters of the novel are included in this document, but I intend to pursue the project to its completion. By writing the first chapters of this novel for my Honors senior project, I was able to sharpen my skills at creating likeable characters, plotting complex conflicts, and building fantasy worlds, and my understanding of the art of writing has greatly improved in the process.

Background

My background in writing fiction has been mostly unofficial. Although I have been dabbling in fiction since early high school, I have only taken two official creative writing courses, only one of which was a university level course. As a student of literature, I have spent far more time in school reading other authors' stories than writing my own. Despite my lack of practical experience in writing fiction, my background in literature has had a significant impact on my attitude towards creative writing, and it is worthwhile to discuss it in some detail here.

I was aware that I would benefit from more creative writing classes when I chose my major. I knew I wanted to be a writer and not a literary scholar when I made the decision. I had already written one novel and outlined three more at the time. Nevertheless, I felt a common dissatisfaction with all of my creative ideas that led me to believe studying literature would be more helpful to me than creative

writing. I sensed that the stories I conjured lacked an important element of insight, that I was not fully grasping the concepts that I wanted to portray, and that, more than my lack of writing skill, my lack of human knowledge was hampering my writing. No matter how much localized research I did on the subjects of my stories, I was missing the broader picture. I reasoned that, before I could write about the world, I had to learn about it. Literature is one avenue to that end. Besides, art students must learn about the great artists that came before them and musicians must learn about history's great musicians, so why wouldn't a reasonable education in creative writing start with an intimate understanding of great authors?

I found plenty of support for this philosophy at both Ball State University and in the writings of other authors. John Gardner, for instance, expresses a similar belief in *The Art of Fiction*: "No one can hope to write really well if he has not learned how to analyze fiction—how to recognize a symbol when it jumps at him, how to make out theme in a literary work, how to account for a writer's selection and organization of fictional details" (19). A writer must know what good writing is and how it works before he or she can produce good work. On a more basic level, a writer must be able to identify clichés and exhausted conflicts, and he or she should be able to produce a wide range of characters that are not based solely on the people he or she has actually met. Reading and analyzing literature is an exercise in broadening perspective, and a broad perspective is necessary to write. I have both heard and read the common expression, "Write what you know." Reading widely and consistently is a wonderful method of expanding "what you know," providing more subject matter to write about.

I am glad that I chose to study literature. By exposing me to a broad and comprehensive range of issues and attitudes, my education has provided me with the experience, knowledge, and insight to discuss the issues I'm compelled to discuss in my writing. Unfortunately, through comparison, I have also discovered that I do not have the eye for careful construction and revision that I might have developed by taking creative writing classes. For that reason, I made my Honors thesis my last opportunity at Ball State University to practice the art of writing.

In the following sections, I will refer to my education and experiences as a student of literature to shed light on my decisions and processes in writing *Witch King*. My brief time as an anthropology major, which unfortunately did not last more than two semesters, is also important. My background in each of these subjects helped to build and solidify *Witch King*, and *Witch King* has helped me to engage with these disciplines as well.

Summary

Conception

The dream that inspired *Witch King* was strange but simple, with a fairy-tale-like tone. As in the present story, it featured a girl falling through a river into a different realm, where she met a prince. Unlike the current version, however, the original prince was fleeing from a marriage with an evil ice queen. His plan was to escape to a mountain sanctuary floating above the ocean, in which a legendary princess prophetess resided. He hoped to ask her hand in marriage, freeing him from his damning betrothal to the ice queen. Upon arriving at the sanctuary, the

pair discovered that the princess prophetess was actually an other-world version of the girl, a doppelganger of sorts. This pleasant discovery resulted in the prince marrying the princess and the girl returning to her own world to later meet her own version of the prince.

Present Version

The current, working version of the story is far more involved and requires a more detailed synopsis. In particular, an explanation of the political and magic systems of the fantasy realm, which I have tentatively named “Thrae” although its name has not yet been divulged in the narrative, may prove complicated when removed from its presentation within the narrative. To simplify the explanation, I will first present a summary of the plot, and then I will describe the elements of the story that need further explanation, such as the political and magic systems. Because the first seven chapters of the present version of the story are included in this thesis, the plot summary will be brief and will focus mainly on the themes, conflicts, and characters. For the incomplete portions of the novel, I will provide the major plot points in chronological order, after which I will provide more detail about characters and conflicts that are to be introduced in the remainder of the novel.

In the first seven chapters of the novel, we are introduced to four major characters: the main protagonist Sydney, the prince (Agdis), Avaloki, and the Witch King. The story opens with a glance at Sydney’s home life. She is the daughter of a major politician, whose ideology influences her interactions with both her peers and her family. She attends public school, where she is bored and disliked by her

classmates because of her unsocial attitude, a product of past problems with friends who manipulated her for her wealth. At home, she is encouraged to read and study to supplement her education, but she feels out of place in her parents' social circles because of the inconsistencies in her education. This conflict between her father's political life and her social life, which is realized through her public, middle class education, is an important part of Sydney's journey into the fantasy realm in *Witch King*. Her interactions with the prince, in particular, illuminate her main conflict, which can be called a conflict between expectation and individuality, or between public responsibility and personal self-actualization. This conflict also mirrors the novel's major themes of public duty and personal identity.

After meeting the prince, Agdis, Sydney learns she must accompany him to the Sibyl of Bayal, who may be able to send her back home. At this point in the novel, Sydney's main concern is returning home, and Agdis's conflict has not yet been revealed in its entirety. Sydney learns that Agdis cannot go near human settlements for reasons yet undisclosed, but he also wants to avoid the spirits and witches that reside in the mountains. The reason for this fear becomes clear when a spirit possesses him after Sydney accidentally leaves with his main form of protection, his amulet.

At this time, the Witch King makes his first appearance, although it is not made known to the readers or Sydney that he is the Witch King. He comes to inform Sydney about their world, although he does not reveal his intentions for doing so. After Sydney realizes that the Witch King has tricked her into leaving Agdis unprotected, Sydney meets Avaloki, who offers to help Sydney and Agdis. Avaloki is

the poorest character, and she and her grandmother have been exiled from human civilization due to accusations of witchcraft. She therefore occupies a unique space in society and in the novel; she rests in the social gray area between witch and guardian, and to mirror this status, she is androgynous, thus also occupying a gray area between the genders as well. As a social pariah and a poorer citizen, her explanations of the world are more confused and rely more heavily on superstition than either Agdis's or the Witch King's more concrete and clear-cut explanations. This confusion of information sheds light on the conflict between spirits and humans but also makes it more difficult for Sydney to understand the ethical conditions that are particular to Thrae.

Both Avaloki and Agdis describe the Witch King as an antagonist, but his helpfulness and Sydney's gut reactions towards him suggest that he, too, occupies a gray space that is neither protagonist nor antagonist. He provides Sydney with information when he meets her in the forest, and when he appears at Mt. Kalka with more information for Sydney and Avaloki, it seems as though he may help them free Agdis. It is not until he reveals himself as the Witch King at the end of chapter seven that the reader or the characters have any reason to distrust him, and then his actions are all called into question.

Chapter seven is the last chapter included in this thesis. Because important aspects of the conflict have not yet been revealed, I will list major plot points for the remainder of the novel:

place, calling upon an ancient law that would allow her to accept the prince's responsibility.

- The Sybil defers to Sydney for a decision. Because of the social issues she has been forced to consider throughout the journey, Sydney cannot make the choice, so she asks to be sent home.

The novel concludes on an uncertain note, potentially allowing for a sequel, but due to the themes and conflicts of the novel, the reader and Sydney should be able to guess who marries the Witch King. This ending is appropriate due to the thematic tension between personal self-actualization and public or political responsibility. Agdis's conflict mirrors Sydney's but on a grander scale. His political responsibility to marry the Witch King at the expense of his personal identity elicits a strong emotional response in Sydney, and she makes it her goal to help him fight against his responsibility. Over the course of the novel, they both learn that their identities include their political responsibilities and that they exist within a social network that requires their participation. Agdis's final agreement to marry the Witch King reflects this understanding, as does Sydney's inability to choose who should be made Witch Queen between Agdis, with whom she sympathizes on a personal level, and Avaloki, who is willing to shoulder the responsibility despite being essentially external to the conflict. Avaloki's offer to sacrifice herself in Agdis's stead is important to Sydney's final revelation, due to Avaloki's unique social and personal situation and her role in the journey. The conflicts give way to the theme of personal growth, which includes the shift from self-conscious

- The Witch King reveals that, because the Witch Queen has died, it is Agdis's duty to take her place as his queen. The ritual for the marriage would include the total erasure of Agdis's physical and social identity.
- The Witch King exorcizes the spirit possessing Agdis and offers him safe passage to Bayal, but Agdis refuses. The Witch King summons the spirits of the mountain to chase the group down to the edge of Urothal.
- Agdis and Avaloki are captured by the guardians of Urothal and taken to the Warden. Sydney avoids capture and calls upon the Witch King for help. The Witch King directs to her a local witch, Eshun, who disguises himself as a human.
- Eshun allows Sydney to possess him, and they rescue Agdis and Avaloki.
- The group travels to the capital, Kalon, during which Avaloki reveals that she believes herself a witch because she caused the death of the bandit who ransomed her mother's soul.
- Agdis's older brother, the Warden of Kalon, confronts them, threatening to execute Agdis. The Witch King, speaking from the mouth of a cat, convinces him to take them to Bayal.
- It is discovered that the Sybil is Sydney's doppelganger and that she is the one who called Sydney to the realm to help Agdis.
- Agdis pleads his case before the Sybil, but because his refusal would require him to renounce his guardianship and damn his older brother to the marriage, he accepts his fate. In response, Avaloki offers to take his

introspection to an intimate understanding of broader social and personal responsibility.

Political and Magic Systems

The political and magic systems of Thrae are introduced in the first seven chapters, but the information becomes confusing as different characters provide various interpretations of each system. The characters' misconceptions will be solved as the story progresses. As they are presented in the currently completed portion of the story, however, they are still difficult to understand, so a more straightforward and complete explanation of the two systems will be helpful.

The political system of *Witch King* is divinely inspired in order to ensure its efficiency. In Thrae, there are two ageless kings who each take mortal queens. The kings are both immediately connected to their respective domains, as detailed in chapter four. Because of their duties, they cannot perform other tasks, such as making executive decisions or enforcing laws. These tasks are delegated to their queens and children. The queens, like the queen pieces in chess, are the most powerful offensive and defensive entities in the world, with divine magic that parallels the kings'. Each queen's children become the governing body of their respective kingdoms; for instance, in the kingdom of humans, the children of the Guardian King and Queen become the Wardens (governors) of each major city. Their descendants make up the royal elite.

The role of the princes and princesses is important, and since it has not been explained yet in the narrative, it deserves more attention. The conflict of *Witch King* revolves around this role. In order to ensure balance between the kingdoms, royal

weddings occur, similar to the political weddings that occur in our world. Each royal pair is responsible for producing offspring soon after marriage, so that their children are more likely to be of age when the queen of the opposite kingdom dies. In the case of multiple children, the older children are free to pursue political positions as soon as their younger siblings reach maturity, and the youngest mature child becomes betrothed to the king of the other kingdom during their coming-of-age ceremony. When a marriage becomes necessary, the prince or princess is transported to Bayal, where their soul pendant is surrendered to the Sybil in the presence of both kings. With the gods as witnesses, the soul is removed from the pendant and transported into a new one, and the physical state of the prince or princess is magically altered to meet the needs of the opposite kingdom. The ritual requires the total annihilation of the queen's previous physical and social identity. This change is necessary to ensure that she becomes fully immersed in her new kingdom (and subsequently rejected from her former one by her old subjects) and that she is capable of bearing children to continue the eternal arrangement between the kingdoms, which is one of the most crucial elements that keeps the balance and peace between them. She then pledges allegiance to her husband and takes up her duties as the queen of the kingdom she once feared and despised.

The magic system is intertwined with the political system and also has religious and social implications. Sydney learns quickly upon arriving that there are two kinds of magic: witchcraft and weardcraft. At first, the distinction between them seems concrete. Both are divine forms of magic that are inherited through royal or divine bloodlines, but weardcraft is the form used to benefit and protect

humans while witchcraft is the form used to harm humans. The *Witch King* reveals over time, however, that there is in fact no difference between them besides the label given to them by society. The only thing that distinguishes them from one another is the judgment of the person or society they affect.

Sorcery, on the other hand, is another form of magic entirely. Unlike witchcraft and weardcraft, it is not a divine form of magic. It cannot force natural states to change or events to happen directly, and its effects are more immediate and localized. Instead, sorcery is based on an intimate understanding of the energies of the world, which are mostly controlled by spirits. When manipulated properly, these energies can affect an object, animal, or person in beneficial or harmful ways. A person does not need to be from a magical bloodline to use sorcery. The thieves in chapter four, for instance, use sorcery to put Agdis into a deep sleep by manipulating the bone of a dead man, death being associated with sleep.

The magic and political systems both affect the way humans perceive spirits and witches, and vice versa. The two together influence the social norms and stigmas of each kingdom.

Process

Research Process

The process of researching for *Witch King* was not entirely active, in that I found many key sources by accident through my studies. In fact, *Witch King's* metamorphosis from the dream I had in high school to the novel I began to write for

my thesis depended on a series of sources that provided unexpected inspiration for me, often when the story was not on my mind at all.

I had not thought much about the dream that inspired *Witch King* until I was a junior in college and took a semester to study abroad in Ghana, Africa. I took with me the book *When They Severed Earth from Sky: How the Human Mind Shapes Myth* by Elizabeth Wayland Barber and Paul T. Barber. At the time, I had a strong interest in oral storytelling and mythology, and I hoped that *When They Severed Earth from Sky* would provide valuable information on each. While reading the chapter “The Spirit World: A Realm Reversed,” a particular passage struck me as especially interesting: “Reflections reverse your image: if you stand before a mirror and hold out your right hand, your image...appears to hold out its left hand...From this, spirits came to be seen as reversed versions of ourselves and—since most people are right-handed—seen as characteristically left-handed” (168). This idea reminded me of the doppelganger women from my dream, which brought the story to the forefront of my mind again. The concept also later aided me in my world building; for instance, Sydney notices that the sun sets in what she perceives to be the wrong direction in Thrae, and it will be revealed in later chapters that she is identifiable as a spirit in Thrae because she is right-handed.

The semester after my time abroad, I took an anthropology course called “Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion,” in which we read the article “Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande” by E. E. Evans-Pritchard. This article inspired the basis of the magic system of *Witch King*. Evans-Pritchard writes, “Witchcraft is a causative factor in the production of harmful phenomena in particular places, at

particular times, and in relation to particular persons. It is not a necessary link in the sequence of events but something external to them that participates in them and gives them a peculiar value" (72). Expressed in a way Westerners may understand better, witchcraft for the Azande functions in a way similar to our notion of coincidence, except that the coincidence is prompted by the negative will of another person. This concept inspired the Witch King's explanation to Sydney that nothing in their realm is a coincidence, which holds true throughout the novel. Because of Evans-Pritchard's influence, as well as the influence of the "Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion" course as a whole, I chose to base the magic system of *Witch King* mostly on the traditional magic beliefs of Africa and Southeastern Asia, rather than on the magic systems that are common in the pop culture fantasy genre.

The idea of witches as scapegoats was also influenced by research I did for this class. I wrote an essay on the role of politics in the witch-hunts that occurred in South Africa during the youth rebellions of the antiapartheid movement, and through this research, it became clear that witchcraft accusations could motivate political and social agendas. The notion that witchcraft and witches are often made scapegoats to bear the burden of social ills and unrest is a theory accepted by many anthropologists and can be seen in the witch camps that exist in many parts of Africa today. Learning about the psychological and sociological causes for this kind of scapegoating and how it is implemented helped me to construct the complex relationship between witches and humans.

The discussions we had in the "Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion" course also influenced the idea of a "witch king" as a being related to the king piece of a

chessboard. This concept was not prompted by any particular text but by a statement made by my professor, Dr. Nyce. Although I do not remember the context as well as I wish I did, the phrase “witch king” itself was critical to my process of developing *Witch King*. After imagining the Witch King as a piece on a chessboard, the construction of the two kingdoms followed, as did their perpetual strife. At this point, however, the idea of checks and balances had not occurred to me yet. The kings were neither connected to their lands nor ageless, and it was still acceptable for one of them to be killed. The prince’s main concern in the story at this time was still to make it to the prophetic princess and ask for her hand in marriage, and his betrothal was not to an ice queen but to a member of the Witch King’s court.

It was not until I chose to develop this story for my Honors thesis that I fully constructed the social and political conflicts in *Witch King*. For this task, I focused mostly on *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* by James George Frazer and two essays from *Meeting the Shadow*, “The Enemy Maker” by Same Keen and “Who Are the Criminals?” by Jerry Fjerkenstad.

The essays from *Meeting the Shadow* were important for solidifying the political system of the kingdoms in Thrae. In particular, “The Enemy Maker” was critical for providing me with the connection I needed to apply the scapegoat conflict I learned about while researching witch-hunts. Keen discusses the ways that political systems create enemies to bear the burden of the repressed negative qualities of their ideologies, and he posits that this process of projection, which is done by every nation, creates a need for enemy governments to exist. Fjerkenstad’s “Who Are the Criminals?” was less pivotal, but it still provided me with some

interesting ideas about Agdis's conflict as an outcast of society and how his conflict connects to Sydney's.

Of all the sources that inspired *Witch King*, *The Golden Bough* provided the most information. Frazer's descriptions of different magical systems, beliefs, and rituals from across the world gave rise to many of the rituals and beliefs that I used in *Witch King*. In particular, and most importantly, Frazer's discussion of magician kings, their connection to the world, and their social value solidified the function of the two kings in *Witch King* and their connections to their societies. This relationship is essential to the final version of *Witch King*, as it allowed all the other elements of my research to come together to form the strained tension between the kingdoms and their inhabitants. By providing the inspiration to connect the kings to the health of their respective domains, *The Golden Bough* gave me the tools I needed to put together *Witch King* as it is now.

There are a few other sources that I should mention, although their role in creating *Witch King* was less crucial. I had been reading Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* for several years intermittently, and one passage that I read while piecing together *Witch King*, which discussed the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, helped me to create Avaloki's character. Another notable source is William Blake, whose poems from *Songs of Innocence and Experience* make an appearance in *Witch King*. Both Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones* and John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction* helped me to understand fiction better as I wrote and edited, which allowed me to sharpen my skill in storytelling and revision. To help me better understand the fantasy genre, I looked to Tolkien's "On Fairy-Stories"

the same playlist of music, turn on the lamp, light a cone of incense, and make a pot of black tea. The playlist always began with the same song, which I never listened to otherwise. If I was still unmotivated to write, I would scroll through a collection of pictures that I put together to remind me of the mountainous setting of *Witch King*.

After setting up my routine, I began to work on the more fussy aspects of world building, such as naming locations and characters and deciding how the world would look in general. I had a hard time with this step. Tolkien set a high standard for fantasy world building with his Middle Earth; as put by Edward James in "Tolkien, Lewis, and the Explosion of Genre Fantasy," "*LOTR* came equipped with maps and appendices, but it also came after nearly forty years' work of sub-creation of the world which preceded the action of *LOTR*" (66). It was unrealistic for me to hope that my world could compare in complexity to Tolkien's, given the time and detail he put into the construction of Middle Earth, but even so, I did not want my fantasy world to be a series of specific settings floating in a void. Moreover, in genres that rely on elaborate world building, sometimes adding details that are not entirely important can be a tool in creating the illusion of complexity. James refers to an instance in *LOTR* when Tolkien mentions a queen who is not otherwise mentioned in the trilogy, which James argues helps to create the impression that Middle Earth is as complex and believable as our own world (66). Likewise, John Gardener states, "In all the major genres, vivid detail is the life blood of fiction" (30). In order to help me picture the world for description and consistency and to establish the illusion of thoughtful planning, I made myself a map and named a number of cities (see Appendix). For my personal reference, I provided each of

from his *Tree and Leaf*, *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, and *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. Finally, because I wanted my novel to fit within young adult literature, I did some preliminary research on young adult literature with the help of one of my thesis advisors, Dr. Mix, who directed me to Pam B. Cole's *Young Adult Literature in the 21st Century* and various academic articles, notably Koss and Teale's "What's Happening in Young Adult Literature?: Trends in Books for Adolescents."

Writing Process

The process of writing *Witch King* did not initially present many concrete problems. Because of the research I had done, I was motivated to work, although there were some aspects of the plot that I felt hesitant about due to my projected target audience. I soon learned that there were plenty of obstacles to overcome in my writing, some of which are common to beginning writers and some of which were more personal in nature.

I had finished my research by the beginning of the fall semester of my senior year, and the first step I took towards writing the novel was setting up a routine for myself. Time, space, and atmosphere were all elements I wanted to control in order to keep myself on track and mentally focused. I set aside several hours in the week as work hours, mostly in the afternoon when I am most inclined to be productive. For space, I designated a seat in the corner of my bedroom as my "writing chair," in which I would do nothing but write. Next to it is a small table, on which I keep a lamp with a yellow bulb and a small incense burner. To involve myself in my writing, I always created a particular atmosphere when I sat to write: I would play

these cities with a basic description of trade items and economy, which I do believe helped me to create the impression of a realistic world when I began to write.

When I finally set off to write the first draft, I had my map in hand and a tentative outline, which I have mostly followed without problem. At this point, it was important for me to make some important decisions regarding my audience. I decided that I wanted to write within the young adult genre, which created a set of important questions for me to answer. I was worried, for example, about whether it was appropriate for Sydney to swear. I eventually decided that it would be fine, especially since avoiding the words was laborious and ultimately distasteful. I was also worried about Agdis's marriage to the Witch King, but because it was an integral part of the conflict, I reserved judgment so that I would feel confident enough to pursue the story. Conflicts of this sort plagued me throughout my writing process. Because of my concerns regarding my audience, I was uncertain about my prose and themes. I wanted to keep the story self-contained and entertaining, but I also wanted it to present some insightful commentary on its themes. My background in literature both helped me and hindered me at this point in my writing.

Studying literature in academia can produce the idea that there are intrinsically good works and bad works, good stories and bad stories. Gardner references this dilemma: "To read or write well, we must steer between two extreme views of aesthetic interest: the overemphasis of things immediately pleasurable...and exclusive concern with that which is secondarily but at times more lastingly pleasurable, the fusing artistic vision" (42). Academically celebrated

literature and “pulp” literature are often placed in juxtaposition, with academic literature receiving more credit as valuable. As Gardner suggests, however, both have positive aspects that should be used to create a good but generally accessible story, such as the one I hoped to create with *Witch King*. I wanted *Witch King* to be a young adult fantasy novel with meaningful themes that could be received well by a large and casual audience, but I often found myself struggling to navigate between the “immediately pleasurable” and the “lastingly pleasurable.” Due to my admiration of many incredible authors such as Virginia Woolf, I have always felt more drawn to the sort of “lastingly pleasurable” experimental fiction that has considerable artistic merit, but this preference caused me problems when writing *Witch King*. When both constructing the story and writing it down, I found myself battling against impulses to make my characters too complex and my prose too condensed. I questioned myself often while writing due to these concerns, which compelled me to seek outside perspectives on my work as often as possible.

Once I had finished the first two chapters, I ran into my first major concrete obstacle, which my primary advisor, Ms. Dalton, pointed out to me when I consulted her on the draft. She asked me why Sydney, as the protagonist, needed the journey, or why she was the one who was chosen to undertake it. I had not considered this point, and if I had taken more creative writing courses, I probably would have spent far more time properly developing this basic aspect of Sydney’s character before I started to write. As it was, I wrote Sydney as an unsociable child of a doting, loving father and a mother who was frequently away on anthropological excursions, and her only major character conflict was her failure to take other people more

seriously. After several serious revisions, the first chapter of the novel was entirely rewritten to include more pressing personal conflicts for Sydney to consider, which also allowed for the three main characters, Sydney, Avaloki, and Agdis, to share the conflict of social displacement.

Another serious problem I had trouble addressing was the question of Sydney's spiritual form. Sydney exists in the fantasy realm as a reflection of her doppelganger, the Sybil. As a reflection, Sydney is more or less a spirit. At first, I wrote her condition so that she could touch nothing man-made, which I attempted to explain by suggesting that things altered by humans were "dead," as were guardians, whose souls were removed from their bodies at birth. This explanation was confusing and difficult to maintain, and nearly everyone who read the first drafts was ambivalent about it. I concluded that I had attempted to include too many disparate aspects of my research into Sydney's physical condition, and I made the condition less esoteric in my later drafts.

The more issues I found with my drafts and stories, the harder I found it to write. Instead, I became concerned with editing. My obsession with editing has two root causes: first, I always read a page or paragraph above the section I intend to write before I begin in order to maintain consistency and to return to the mindset of writing, which predisposes me to spend a problematic amount of time editing when I should be writing; and second, whenever I run into an issue with the narrative as I write or reread, I feel uncomfortable adding to the story until it is fixed. I do not like to continue when I am building on a shaky foundation. I sought advice from Ms. Dalton, who let me borrow Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones*. Goldberg

states, "It is important to separate the creator and the editor or internal censor when you practice writing" (26). I found this to be true; the more I thought about the issues in my drafts, the more I felt the urge to edit, which discouraged me from writing. My confidence as a writer dropped. I fell into a writer's block, which I struggled against during the later part of the semester I was working on the novel portion of this thesis. Goldberg's advice is to write out all of my negative emotions towards myself and my writing, because writing out the editor helps the writer become familiar with it and therefore learn to ignore it. I found this method to be unhelpful. Writing out my fears and apprehensions only served to remind me of the thoughts that were holding me back, which, once written down, reinforced the thoughts in my mind. I hated to do it, and I stopped. Instead, I continued to edit my drafts instead of adding to the story.

At this point, I found it difficult to create new material. Although I had hours during the week put aside for writing, developing scenes and dialogue was a task I did not undertake during the hours I wrote. Instead, the task of forming story was something I did as I went about the day, when I was walking, eating, taking showers, and preparing for sleep. Because of my writer's block and the resulting discouragement, my mind could not transfigure the plot points I had written down in my outline into something that would pass as an actual scene in a book. I found this frustrating, and it did not help to rebuild my confidence in my writing.

What finally pulled me out of my funk was an exercise in writing that is actually not completely removed from what Goldberg suggests. Instead of writing out what my internal editor was saying, which was exclusively negative, I wrote

down statements of positive self-affirmation. If I felt guilty for not writing when I should have been, for instance, I would write, "It is okay to take your time." None of these statements contained any negative words such as "not" or "never" in any context. Although it felt foolish and childish at first, this form of positive self-affirmation gradually picked me up. I felt more confident in my writing, and my mind allowed me to spend my quiet moments creating fiction again, which allowed me to finish through chapter seven for this thesis.

Discussion

Genre

Due to its content, *Witch King* is inarguably a fantasy novel, and I specifically chose to situate it within the young adult genre in order to make it accessible to a wide audience. Choosing these genres affected many of my decisions when creating *Witch King*, which impacted many aspects of its plot and the tone. When I first began to work on the novel, my understanding of each of these genres was limited to my own experiences with them. As I wrote, however, I set out to conduct some research to see where *Witch King* would fit within the genres, and I checked to be sure I was avoiding clichés and tired tropes as much as possible, especially within the fantasy genre. The information I uncovered during my research was enlightening for me as a writer and also shed light on *Witch King* as a text in itself.

The Encyclopedia of Fantasy provides a more or less vague definition of fantasy: "A fantasy text is a self-coherent narrative. When set in this world, it tells a story which is impossible in the world as we perceive it...; when set in an

otherworld, the otherworld will be impossible though stories set there may be possible in its terms" (338). While true, this definition is broad and difficult to work with, and the size of the encyclopedia attests to the diversity and depth of the fantasy genre. I was familiar enough with fantasy to know some basic terms. I knew, for instance, that *Witch King* could be considered a "portal fantasy" because of the transition from the mundane world to Thrae, and I also knew that Sydney could be considered a "chosen one" because of her summoning and her connection to the Sybil. I had also identified some common aspects of fantasy that *Witch King* does not have. Prophecies, fantasy races like dwarves or elves, and a concrete "evil" that must be overcome are common and sometimes clichéd tropes that are used in fantasy that I made a point to avoid. In particular, I was aware that I did not want a clear source of evil driving the narrative from early in the planning stages. Evil can be symbolically significant in fantasy, as proven by both Tolkien and Rowling, but for *Witch King*, this common fantasy convention could not be reconciled with the themes or conflicts.

When I began to research fantasy, I first turned to *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, and I found Edward James's essay "Tolkien, Lewis, and the Explosion of Genre Fantasy" to be the most helpful. James describes the ways Tolkien and Lewis have impacted the fantasy genre. For instance, Tolkien's *LOTR*, according to James, legitimized the fantasy realm: "After 1955 fantasy writers no longer had to explain away their worlds by framing them as dreams, or travelers' tales, or by providing them with any fictional link to our own world at all" (65). I was particularly drawn to this idea. As I mentioned in previous sections, I struggled

with writing *Witch King* on occasion because I was torn between my artistic vision and my desire to make *Witch King* entertaining and accessible to a broad audience. Pure fantasy, as opposed to magic realism or folklore, seems to be taken less seriously in the academic studies I have been exposed to as an undergraduate, and so I had subconsciously developed a prejudice against them. As a result, I have always been somewhat shy about my attraction to fantasy, despite the fact that I am drawn to it almost exclusively as a writer. James's discussion of Tolkien's philosophy on fantasy, especially his confidence that fantasy did not need to be explained away and could actually provide insights that more realistic novels could not, helped me to dispel this prejudice. I followed James's reference to Tolkien's "On Fairy-Stories."

Reading "On Fairy-Stories" strengthened my conviction to write *Witch King* due to its positive examination of fantasy as representative of reality. According to Tolkien, "Fantasy is a natural human activity. It certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity. On the contrary. The keener and the clearer the reason, the better fantasy will make it" (74-75). Tolkien put words to a sentiment that I had been having trouble expressing: when used seriously, fantasy is a mode by which the real world can be critically appraised. Fantasy is not separate from the real world, or the "Primary World," as Tolkien called it, but rather reflects real truths in unreal situations. As Tolkien puts it, "Fantasy is made out of the Primary World, but a good craftsman loves his material, and has a knowledge and feeling for clay, stone and wood which only the art of making can give" (Tolkien 74). Tolkien

inspired me to stop thinking in terms of art and entertainment, especially with regards to the presentation of my story, which I knew was necessarily fantastic. I began to understand that the themes of *Witch King* are not too grand for their presentation in *Witch King* but are an intrinsic part of the fantasy that allows them to be expressed. Without that fantasy, the themes and conflicts of *Witch King* could not be explored to the same extent. At the same time, entertainment is a natural and important part of fantasy. "Uncorrupted, it does not seek delusion nor bewitchment and domination; it seeks shared enrichment, partners in making and delight, not slaves" (Tolkien 74). "Enrichment" here is an important term when considering thematic vision. The goal of a story like *Witch King* should not be to preach, as preaching fails to inspire the sort of emotional understanding that is fostered through the sympathetic relationship between a character and the reader. Especially for young adults, who may have their fill of preaching and pushing in their daily lives, it is important that a novel of this sort engage them rather than lecture to them. Entertainment value is not secondary to a successful fantasy but necessary in order for the reader to connect with the text. With Tolkien as my inspiration, I reconciled my artistic vision with my desire to entertain through the fantasy genre.

Learning about the young adult genre was far more difficult than learning about fantasy, mostly because less academic attention has been paid to young adult fiction. Young adult fiction, I've discovered, is not nearly as restrictive as I thought it might be. My understanding of the young adult genre was shaky at best, and I was not alone in this; many of the people to whom I described my novel took "young

adult” to mean childish or frivolous, and they often associated the term with high school dramas and teen romances. To say I understood the genre better would be a lie, given the amount of time I spent worrying about swear words. Young adult literature, it turns out, can be far more complex and gritty than I originally thought. According to Pam Cole, “Young adult literature offers a window through which teens can examine their lives and the world in which they live. Unlike classical texts, young adult literature addresses modern-day issues—peer pressure, family relationships, sexuality, bigotry, and racism, and it connects teens with the pop culture world in which they live” (61). Cole lists traits of young adult fiction that set it apart as a genre, among them multi-themed story, tension, original ideas, and no critic pandering.

Learning about these elements was reassuring for me because of some of my personal doubts regarding the story of *Witch King*. In particular, I have always been hesitant about the story’s demand to marry Agdis to the Witch King, due to the issues of consent and gender involved with forcing a boy to marry a man, regardless of whether the boy is first made into a woman. I was also concerned about the hereditary connection between Agdis and the Witch King, which is shaky but present nonetheless. These elements of *Witch King* made me nervous because they seemed too controversial. At the same time, I felt righteous in my pursuit of the story as I imagined it. After all, stories in which young women are sent off to marry older men are plentiful to the point of being cliché, and a critical mirror to such stories is overdue. I wanted to present *Witch King* to younger readers in particular due to the questions it might raise about gender, identity, justice, and responsibility.

Traditional gender norms have made it commonplace for women to be forced into nonconsensual relationships for the sake of money, property, or politics, but flipping the power structure so that a male takes the place of a female shows the injustice of these situations. At the same time, structuring the power and political systems the way I have in *Witch King* creates a contradictory statement about the importance of responsibility over consent, which I hope will further confuse the issue. It is not a question that can be answered easily, because in the case of individuals who wield power on behalf of other people, questions about personal desires in the face of responsibility are not simple. Because of young adults' unique position between childhood and adulthood, when questions of power, authority, and responsibility are starting to be considered from the adult position of responsibility as well as the youthful position of subordination, I wanted this tension to be present and uncomfortable. I also wanted to press the issue of gender and identity through the relationship between Agdis and the Witch King. The relationship is queer, but also ultimately heterosexual, due to the ritual that changes Agdis's physical body. This change is necessary to continue reproduction in the royal families, but it is as nonconsensual as the marriage and creates a rift between Agdis's physical sex and his gender identity. This rift is meant to push against the assumptions created by the normative correlation between physical sex, gender identity, gender expression, and personal identity. Because many young people deal with gendered issues, I feel justified in presenting these issues in *Witch King* through the struggles of the characters, but I am well aware that narratives that contradict heteronormative values tend to be controversial.

Despite my rationalizations for these controversial elements of *Witch King*, I was afraid from the start that somebody would find the story too inappropriate due to its transgressive elements. Reading about young adult literature has laid that fear to rest. It has become clear to me that many of the conflicts that are considered young adult are in fact gruesome and grave, so my own story is not pressing against any boundaries that have not already been tried. Most importantly, Cole taught me a lesson in young adult literature that will help me in all fiction: "The best stories are crafted by writers who avoid pandering to critics. That is, they think about the story, not the story's purpose, message, or the 'sensitive' nature of their audience" (62). This simple statement, when coupled with my revelations about fantasy, assured me that I need not worry so much about the reception of *Witch King* at this stage in its completion. While it's important to keep the audience in mind, a story that is worth being told should be regardless of naysayers.

Themes and Characters

I have already touched on many of the themes, but I have yet to discuss the ways they are presented in the text and what their importance is in the context of *Witch King*. *Witch King* is in many ways a coming-of-age novel for Sydney, and as such, many of the themes are connected to maturity. For instance, the conflict between personal identity and social responsibility that exists at the heart of Sydney's, Agdis's, and Avaloki's character conflicts is related to the process of becoming an adult in a society that demands participation from its members. In this conflict is also embedded the theme of political responsibility, which, while also

connected to the characters' conflicts, is meant to evoke a critical evaluation of the societies presented in *Witch King* and, by reflection, our own. Justice, order, security, and utility ethics are all issues that are related to the theme of political responsibility.

Politics play an important role in the realizations of these themes. The kingdoms of Thrae have a complex relationship with each other that relies on a number of checks and balances, many of which are not immediately obvious to Sydney or the reader. These checks and balances are not arbitrary; many of them were inspired by my research, which situates the laws of the fantasy realm Thrae within the laws that do or have governed human activity in our own world. These laws are no less complicated and convoluted in Thrae than they are here, and it is the complicated and convoluted nature of these laws that make them so worthwhile to explore through fantasy rather than through non-fiction or realistic fiction.

The first and most obvious of the checks and balances are the ageless kings: the Witch King and the Guardian King. These kings were inspired by Frazer's magician king from *The Golden Bough*, whose position within society is described in some detail. The magician king is immediately connected to nature; "The greatest care must, therefore, be taken both by him and of him; and his whole life, down to its minutest details, must be so regulated that no act of his, voluntary or involuntary, may disarrange or upset the established order of nature" (166). These kings are both awe-inspiring and terrifying, because their existences can cause both fruitfulness and total destruction. As explained in chapter four, this tension keeps each kingdom from annihilating the other completely for fear of natural catastrophe.

They also keep their own kingdoms in check, since the populace requires protection from the forces of the opposite kingdom.

The interdependency of the royalty and the peasantry has not yet been fully explored in the chapters presented for this thesis, but it is also a significant part of this system. It is important to note that the kings are not separate from their people, despite their unique positions of power:

On the contrary, the sovereign in them exists only for his subjects; his life is only valuable so long as he discharges the duties of his position by ordering the course of nature for his people's benefit. So soon as he fails to do so, the care, the devotion, the religious homage which they had hitherto lavished on him cease and are changed into hatred and contempt; he is dismissed ignominiously, and may be thankful if he escapes with his life. Worshipped as a god one day, he is killed as a criminal the next. (Frazer 169)

This is true not only for the kings themselves, but also for their descendants, particularly their children who become Wardens. This tension between the royal and wealthy class, who are almost exclusively magical by bloodline, and the poorer, mundane population is the base of the theme of political responsibility in *Witch King*.

Both Sydney and Agdis must struggle directly with this theme, which also presents itself as their conflict between personal identity and public duty. Agdis's struggle is more apparent, since he is the victim of the system who Sydney must help. Agdis's position in society is difficult. As the heir to the Witch Queen's throne

and the fiancé of the Witch King, he has a responsibility both to his own kingdom and to the kingdom he must join. Should he refuse his duty, the Witch King would be defenseless and without an executive co-ruler, which would result in the disintegration of his domain, the domain of spirit. Furthermore, if the Witch King and Queen do not have children in a timely manner, they doom the kingdom of flesh to a similar fate, since the Guardian King would have no queen to marry when the time came to do so. Agdis's refusal to marry upsets the balance of the entire world, and, on a more basic scale, betrays the devotion of the common people who provide his wealth. By utilitarian ethics, he is in the wrong.

Yet, if we look at the situation from a more individualistic point of view as Westerners are inclined to do, to force Agdis to marry against his will, at the expense of his entire identity, would be cruel. This position is especially poignant when considered from the point of view of the main character, Sydney. Because Sydney is not from the land in question, her perception of the situation is colored by her own philosophical and social background. We, as the audience, share her point of view, and our perception should also be biased in favor of Agdis's freedom. This tension between social responsibility and personal identity is one that would be difficult for many people to answer, particularly young Americans who are beginning to learn that their dreams and ambitions may be stunted by the demands of society.

Sydney's struggle is a micro version of Agdis's and may more closely mirror the reader's. As the daughter of a politician and a member of a wealthier family, Sydney must reconcile her personal desires with the inescapable reality of her social

situation. Sydney, at the beginning of the story, shows a desire to divorce herself from the issues of her identity that she must come to term with in order to grow. She isolates herself from her classmates and feels out of place in her parents' social circles, yet it is implied that her father keeps her in public school so she would be exposed to people of different socioeconomic statuses for her own benefit. Sydney could easily one day hold the kind of power her father holds, and so it is crucial for Sydney to understand the demands of public service. In a democratic society, these demands would ideally include understanding the needs of the people she represents and putting them before her own.

Sydney's and Agdis's conflict with politics and personal desires mirrors in many ways a teenager's growth into a young adult or adult. An important distinction between childhood and adulthood is the ability to meet social responsibilities. An adult must have a job to pay for housing and, if necessary, family. An adult pays taxes and votes, and most adults understand how to act in socially sanctioned ways under most conditions. Children, on the other hand, are concerned with building selfhood, and they often fail to consider the broader social implications of their actions. The ability of the characters to understand their responsibilities to their greater societies, while uncomfortable, is a necessary step towards their self-actualization as adults.

Avaloki is a unique character in this aspect, because unlike Sydney or Agdis, she does not have any special obligations to society. In fact, because she is an outcast, she does not have a society at all. Despite this, at the end of the story, the

one who will be most comfortable taking up the burden of public sacrifice will be Avaloki, because unlike the other characters, she is already ready to be an adult.

Avaloki is based on the Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of Compassion who is beloved across Asia. Avalokiteshvara, like his counterparts Kwan Yin and Kwannon, is androgynous and is represented in both male and female forms. Joseph Campbell discusses these representations of the bodhisattva of Compassion: "They emerge always with a certain mystery; for they conduct the mind beyond objective experience into a symbolic realm where duality is left behind" (128). Avaloki as a character is constructed with this idea in mind. She is the breakdown of duality in the world of *Witch King*. Born a guardian, she assumes she is a witch because she has done something her own society would deem criminal. She swears fidelity to the Guardian King and humanity, but she associates freely with spirits and witches. Avaloki is the character in which the duality between human and spirit, guardian and witch, and good and evil are broken down. The separation between self and society seems more apparent in Avaloki because of her rejection from society, yet she defends society's right to repress ideas it cannot accept, such as the false distinction between witchcraft and weardcraft. She also breaks down the distinction between man and woman as constructed through typical gender identity and gender expression through her androgyny and agender qualities. This breakdown is important in terms of Agdis's own struggle with becoming Witch Queen, as Avaloki's example allows him to conceptualize a situation in which his whole internal identity is not destroyed by the ritual of royal marriage.

In the narrative, Avaloki's role is to act as the moral measure and to guide the other characters to their own realization of their responsibilities. She does not do this consciously but through example, by exhibiting positive and noble personal characteristics that earn the other characters' respect over the course of the story. Even though she does not understand the way society works on a conscious level, she understands that certain steps must be taken to allow for it to continue peacefully. For instance, she understands the way just power dynamics work from her simple relationship with her grandmother: Avaloki does the physical labor, and her grandmother provides guidance and wisdom as the matriarch. By referring to this relationship when she talks to Agdis and Sydney, she makes it clear that a just political structure works in a similar, if far more complicated, way: there is a class that provides the material needs for society, and there is a class that guides it. Both are important, but the relationship must be mutually beneficial to work. This idea contradicts both Sydney's and Agdis's desires, which initially makes both of them uncomfortable. Due to her consistently moral and compassionate actions, however, Avaloki sets an honorable example that works with other aspects of the plot to change the other character's perspective.

Avaloki's conflict is also directly related to the conflict of scapegoating, which is a pervasive theme in *Witch King*. Sam Keen explains scapegoating in a political context: "We scapegoat and create absolute enemies, not because we are intrinsically cruel, but because focusing our anger on an outside target, striking at strangers, brings our tribe or nation together and allows us to be a part of the close and loving in-group" (202). Avaloki and her grandmother are both politically and

socially sanctioned scapegoats. Although neither are actually witches, they are branded as witches when connected to crimes they may or may not have committed due to their society's need to focus their fears on a target and to estrange the target to protect the sanctity of their in-group. Their plight outlines a serious problem that exists not only in the fictional realm of Thrae but also in our own world. The inspiration for this conflict, as I've mentioned before, was the actual witch-hunts that took place in South Africa during the antiapartheid movement. Witch-hunts happen across Africa in times of political turmoil or stress, and witch camps are a problem that has not been solved due to its cultural depth. This sort of injustice has been seen in our own cultural history, with the Salem witch trials. I wanted to present this conflict to engage the audience in critical thought concerning the social and political "others" upon whom they may be dumping their own psychological baggage. For instance, there is still widespread prejudice against Muslims due to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The likelihood of any particular Muslim being anything other than an average, decent human being is the same as the likelihood of finding a disagreeable person from any other demographic, and I consider it important to inspire young adults to think through biased assumptions so that they can come to that conclusion on their own. Since much of the help Sydney, Agdis, and Avaloki receive comes from witches and spirits instead of the panicking human population, I hope the reader will reconsider their assumptions about "good" and "evil."

Conclusion

Writing *Witch King* has given me the opportunity to finally apply the concepts I have learned as a student of literature to a work of original fiction. This

creative project has provided me with valuable insight into the art of writing, particularly of writing fantasy, and has also allowed me to reflect on myself as a writer. In particular, learning how to cope with writer's block and understanding the importance of mental clarity to my writing process will prove to be invaluable to me as I finish *Witch King* and embark on my next project. I still have plenty of room to grow, which is obvious when I compare myself to the brilliant authors I've studied over the past four years. Even in the fantasy genre alone, with masters like Tolkien setting the standard of excellence, it will take more than one Honors creative project to perfect my writing and storytelling skills. It may take an entire lifetime, if it is possible at all.

While it would be wonderful to count myself among the great authors someday, one of the most important lessons I took away from this project is that obsession with grandeur and preoccupation with elevated standards can and does distort artistic vision. Authors who are always questioning the quality and profundity of their ideas may find themselves trapped in a cycle of obsessive revisions and writer's block, from which they will not be able to escape unless they give their ideas some credit. If I were to impart any piece of advice to inspiring writers based on my experiences writing this thesis, it would be to avoid this cycle by allowing their ideas the benefit of the doubt. A balance must be struck when evaluating the content and themes of a story; on one hand, it is important to challenge ideas to make them better, but on the other, focusing too much on the shortcomings or controversial aspects of a story can feed fears of failure and inadequacy, which can destroy it before it can realize its potential. If I had spent any

more time worrying about Agdis's marriage to the Witch King or fretting about the literary quality of my themes and characters, I would have not been able to beat my writer's block. Now that I know that I struggle maintaining confidence in my ideas and artistic vision, I can continue to address this problem in the future so that I can be true to my own imagination. Hopefully as I continue to write in the fantasy and young adult genres, I will be able to reconcile my intellectual and artistic aspirations with my desire to create entertaining stories that are accessible to a wide audience.

Works Cited

- Barber, Elizabeth Wayland, and Paul T. Barber. *When They Severed Earth From Sky: How the Human Mind Shapes Myth*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.
- Blake, William. *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. 1793. *Poets' Corner-Bookshelf*. Poets' Corner. Web. 26 Sep. 2013.
- Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 1949. ABACUS ed. London: Sphere Books, 1975.
- Cole, Pam B. *Young Adult Literature in the 21st Century*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009.
- Evans-Pritchard, E. E. "The Notion of Witchcraft Explains Unfortunate Events." *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958. 63-83.
- "Fantasy." *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. 1997.
- Fjerkenstad, Jerry. "Who Are The Criminals?" *Meeting the Shadow: The Hidden Power of the Dark Side of Human Nature*. Ed. Connie Zweig and Jeremiah Abrams. New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1991. 226-232.
- Frazer, James George. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. USA: Konecky & Konecky, 2010.
- Gardner, John. *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*. New York: Vintage books, 1983.
- Goldberg, Natalie. *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*. Boston: Shambhala, 1986.

- James, Edward. "Tolkien, Lewis, and the Explosion of Genre Fantasy." *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*. Ed. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2012. 62-78.
- Keen, Sam. "The Enemy Maker." *Meeting the Shadow: The Hidden Power of the Dark Side of Human Nature*. Ed. Connie Zweig and Jeremiah Abrams. New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1991. 197-201.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. "On Fairy-Stories." *The Tolkien Reader*. New York: Random House, 1966.

Appendix

Map of Thrae



Witch King

Chapter 1

Sydney Armistead jolted awake, gasping. The residue of the dream clung so persistently to her mind that she did not recognize her own room. She lay still, pulling herself from the depths of her subconscious, which seemed desperate to keep her muddled until she reached the dream's conclusion. Even awake, the solemn images felt more like a memory than a figment of her sleeping mind. The sensation disturbed her, and she pulled herself upright with a groan.

The afternoon light sliced through the cracks around her curtain. Her clock read half-past two. She grimaced, trying to shake the faint feeling of cool ancient hallways and ocean spray. There was something important that she had forgotten, an actual memory and not a fake dream one. It had something to do with her father...and as she began to piece it together, she heard the front door shut below her room and her parents talking to one another as they walked into the hall.

"Shit," she hissed, creeping out of bed. She pulled on a pair of jeans and pressed her ear to the carpet. Her father's heavy footsteps rose up the stairs, ascending with practiced restraint towards her parents' room on the third floor. Her mother was singing in the kitchen. She bit her lip, considering her options, before lifting herself to her feet and slipping out of her room.

She sneaked down the stairs as quietly as she could and tiptoed to the front door, grabbing her backpack on the way. Dropping to the floor, she began to wrestle her shoes onto her feet.

"Sydney?" Sydney froze and looked up. Her mother had emerged from the kitchen to follow her father up the stairs.

"Oh, uh...hi, Mom! I just got home!"

"I didn't hear the door open."

"I was quiet. You know, thinking about stuff. Deep, philosophical things."

"Sydney, school doesn't get out for another half hour."

Sydney opened her mouth and closed it. "Well..." she said, pulling her shoes off again, "I felt sick, so...?"

A look of deep disappointment crossed her mother's face and she sighed, glancing up the stairs. "Come in here," she said, gesturing to the kitchen. Sydney grimaced and obeyed, leaving her backpack at the door. Her mother turned to her and asked, "When did you come home?"

Sydney shrugged. "Third period?"

"Sydney...*why*?"

Shrugging again, Sydney dropped her eyes and glanced around. There was a new stack of books on the table in the dining room.

"Sydney."

"You know, just...usual stuff. Some guy hit me with a spit wad, and I didn't care for that."

The disappointment passed across her mother's face again, edged with a heavy, helpless sadness. "Oh, Sydney..."

"Yeah, yeah."

"But you can't just skip class like that."

"Why not?" Sydney said. "They already think I think I'm better than everyone else, so I might as well live up to their expectations and lock myself away in our grand ol' castle. Maybe I can learn the more practical art of being a lady. It'd probably serve me better than public education anyway. Hasn't Dad found me an eligible bachelor for a prosperous political marriage yet?"

The corner of her mother's lip twitched upwards, and she said, "He hasn't said anything to me about it if he has. 'Art of being a lady'...I know you were upstairs sleeping."

Sydney shrugged. "Ladies sleep, right?"

"Probably not," her mother said with a short laugh. She turned to the island counter and took an apple out of a large bowl, and as she began to slice it, she said, "But Sydney, I am serious. You need to start working things out."

"It's not my *fault*."

"Are you sure you're not a bit...chilly?"

"Wouldn't *you* be?"

"Well...maybe a bit, but that doesn't help you—"

"Maggie?" her father called from upstairs. They both looked up. "Is that Sydney I hear?"

She shot Sydney a look and called back, "Yes, dear, she came home early to prepare for the banquet."

"*Shit!*" Sydney said, grabbing a fistful of hair. Her mom looked at her disapprovingly but withheld her admonishment to listen to her father. Sydney

waited until they had finished speaking and whispered, "I forgot about the fundraising dinner! Do I have to go to that?"

"Now you do," her mother said. Sydney groaned.

"How fancy do I need to be?" she asked.

"Sydney, you've been going to dinners since you were a child."

"I guess."

Her mother glanced at her and offered her a slice of apple, and Sydney took it with a sigh. Crossing her arms, she walked into the dining room and examined the stack of books on the table. Her father's heavy footsteps moved from his bedroom to the stairway, and he began his descent. With a glance at the stairs, Sydney picked up the top book and read its title: *Second Treatise of Government* by John Locke.

"Dad?" she called. He didn't answer, but she could hear him approach her. She turned and waved the book at him. "These aren't for me, are they?"

"They are indeed," he replied, taking the book and setting it back down. "I thought you might like your own copies."

"Dad...I don't like reading this stuff."

"I have included a full spectrum of political theory and philosophy. I even threw in some Thoreau. I'm sure you will find something that suits your fancy."

"You're assuming that I'm actually going to search through this garbage for that something."

"Yes, I am," he said. "It's important to supplement your education."

"How about instead of supplementing my education at home, I just go to a better school where they might teach me this stuff anyway? You went to a fancy boarding school, right? Isn't that what rich people do with rich kids?"

"Education is more than what you learn in school, child."

"I didn't know being bored and frustrated was a part of my education," Sydney said. Instead of replying, her father dropped his hand on her shoulder twice, patting her with either sympathy or dismissal. It was hard for Sydney to tell the difference.

He turned and went to speak with her mother, and Sydney scowled down at the pile of books. When she was younger, he had read to her Homer's *Iliad*, and ever since, she had pictured him as Agamemnon, the arrogant and cunning commander of the Greek army fighting the Trojans. This is how she imagined him winning his seat in the Senate, fully clothed in armor with the spoils of war amassed around him. When she saw him on the television, he held himself like he was descended from a god of some ancient and noble pantheon, just as Agamemnon was descended from Zeus. And like his poor daughter Iphigenia, she felt that she had been sacrificed for his glorious agenda, not to a vengeful goddess but to a vengeful public who wanted their politicians to be neighbors as well as figureheads. He had always insisted that she attend public school, and it was easy for her to believe that it was for his own image more than for her benefit. He was the Senator who understood the plight of the people, whose child attended school with the children of the middle and working classes. She was just a pawn in his campaign games, who made him just that much more appealing.

Yet sometimes he did show uncharacteristic concern for the state of the world, and his ambition sometimes took on a deeper, more personal dimension. So it seemed when he convinced his brother to run for governor of the state. He gave him an impassioned speech about how much good it would do to have a new political leadership that would listen to the voices of the poor and oppressed. When he talked about the poor and oppressed, the lines in his face grew sharper and his eyes darkened, and by all appearances he seemed legitimately angry that their problems were constant and unresolved. It seemed like he really did want to understand the plight of the people. In these cases, it was hard for Sydney to maintain her conviction that she was a victim of his games. His political aspirations hardly seemed like games at all when he talked like that. It seemed that he really did believe he was teaching her something by removing her from the elitist world he had grown up in.

Noble or not, whatever lesson she was supposed to have learned, she hadn't learned it. He had made a grave miscalculation, either in her character or in her environment. A fair few manipulative friendships in middle school had taught her to distrust anyone who knew her family's fortune, and by high school, she had become standoffish and caustic. To compound her already sizable problems with her peers, her image was intricately linked to her father's, and when his views or policies upset the families of her classmates, her classmates brought their resentment to school with them. Even outside of school, she floundered. In the company of her parents' acquaintances, she felt unrefined and unaccomplished. In her own home, she felt a constant pressure to engage in heavy scholarship. The

older she got, the more isolated she felt, until she could hardly stand the thought of social interaction. Even the idea of attending a fundraising dinner for her uncle's campaign was taxing. She sighed and stared down at the stack of books her father had bought her. Glancing at her parents, she toppled it over and grabbed the copy of Thoreau's *Walden* resting beneath the philosophy.

"I'm going to go read by the river," she said, waving the book at her parents. Her father glanced over at her.

"I thought you came home to get ready for the dinner," he said.

"Yeah, but...I have to clear my mind, you know?" She tucked the book under her arm and left the house through the large patio doors that opened to their well-manicured lawn.

Strolling across the lawn, Sydney shook the residual stress from her mind, willing herself to dissociate her emotions from her responsibilities. Memories of old dinners imposed themselves upon her. They used to be fun when she was kid, but the more recent, more exhausting memories far outweighed the enjoyable ones. She purged those thoughts from her mind and began to search for something more enjoyable to think about.

Almost as though it had been waiting to emerge, the memory of the dream she had while napping pushed its way to the forefront of her mind. It was a pleasant change of thought, and she let it overpower her. The near-tangible recollection of an old stone temple battled with her present physical senses for her attention. She hiked into the forest behind her house, and the flickering shadows from the canopy blended into her memory of flickering torchlight. The smell of salty seawater filled

her nose. In her mind, she was climbing a tower. There was a woman waiting for her at its apex, and her elegance conveyed a profound wisdom, both ancient and divine. The woman's face was Sydney's face. The dream faded, and Sydney stopped at the edge of the river, feeling a strange sense of loss.

The spring melt and a series of heavy showers had increased the river's flow, and it swelled over its bank. The rock Sydney usually sat on was submerged. There were plenty of logs and boulders that could have served her purposes well enough, but Sydney felt compelled to look downstream, where she knew a brook fed into the river. After a brief pause, she began to pick a careful path along the edge of the water, climbing under branches and through the snaring underbrush.

Although it wasn't an especially warm day, Sydney arrived at the brook wiping sweat from her brow. Like the river, the brook had also overtaken its banks and flooded the nearby land, and a large pile of debris had collected at its mouth from both its flow and the river's. Plopping down on a decaying log, Sydney pulled a hair tie from her wrist and tied her dark hair back. She juggled the book in her hands and stared across the river with her dream doppelganger's face hovering in the back of her mind. Her hands became less restless as her mind's restlessness grew. After a few minutes, she set the book down on the log and stood up, walking to the pile of debris at the mouth of the brook and hoisting herself up.

The flat, forested land on the opposite bank bored her. She surveyed the scenery, searching for something she could not define or explain, and her eyes dropped to the water. Something glinted. Sydney started and looked closer, feeling an inexplicable wave of excitement ripple through her. Caught on one of the

branches that had sunk deep into the river was a necklace. It was an intricate pendant, inlaid with various gemstones and trailing braided, beaded tassels of fine silk. The gold of its surface glimmered in the sunlight.

Sydney paused, watching the necklace sway in the current and deciding what to do about it. It looked as though it hadn't been there for long, and, judging by the quality of its detailed ornamentation, somebody was probably missing it sorely. She glanced up and down the banks of the river, wondering who had been climbing over the debris of the flood in recent days while wearing such a fine piece of jewelry; there were plenty of people in her neighborhood who would wear the gaudy thing out on casual errands, but not many that would take it to the river. She thought about leaving it for its owner to find, but her eyes stayed fixed on its swaying pendant. She could not quell the steady pulse of excitement flowing through her body. Pressing her lips into a thin line, she said, "Dad'll know what to do with it," and clambered over the hazardous pile of wood towards the water.

She crawled to the lowest stable log she could reach and braced herself on a branch protruding from the pile beside it, leaning towards the necklace. It was farther than she had expected, so she stretched, allowing herself to hover precariously above the water. As slowly as the river ran, she didn't expect much of a disaster if she fell in.

Grunting a curse, she made an awkward lunge for the pendant, nearly yanking the branch that anchored her out of its bundle. Her entire arm dipped into the frigid water as her fingers closed around the shimmering chain. She inhaled sharply and pulled her arm out, necklace in hand, but a strange tingle pulsed up her

arm that wasn't connected to the cold. A sudden, acute sense of vertigo overcame her. Her surroundings felt distant, as though she were looking up from the bed of the river and not from its bank, and muffled noises without a source filled her ears. It sounded like somebody was yelling. Feeling sick, she leaned over and reached down for a handful of water to splash against her face, but, to her horror, the reflection staring up at her was not her own.

Sydney screamed and recoiled from the water, accidentally dislodging the branch that held her from the pile entirely. She toppled over with a cascade of sticks, and the water raged around her, rushing her downstream in a swirling surge of undercurrents and foam. She flailed helplessly, straining to reach the surface. The river rolled her up for air and took her back under, drawing her between gigantic boulders and down a furious set of rapids before it ran her into a shallow shelf of rock. Coughing up liquid, she pulled herself out of the river, shivering with cold and alarm.

"What—?" she choked, looking around her. The gentle forests that surrounded Sydney's house were nowhere to be seen. She rested on a rock at the base of a stout and craggy cliff, which collapsed into a stony bluff just yards downstream. Evergreen trees peppered the slopes on both sides of the river, and the dull green hills rose sharply to meet precipices of solid rock, forming mountains that loomed above the valley. Even the smell of the air was foreign.

Sydney turned to look up the river, searching for something familiar. The rapids rumbled on, heedless of her growing distress. She sucked air in through her teeth and struggled to her feet. "Help," she said, stumbling through the shallow

water towards the end of the cliff wall, still shivering. Losing composure, she began to shout, "Somebody...somebody! Somebody, help me!"

To her relief, stones began to slide down the hill, and she heard someone return her call. "Here!" she yelled, staggering around the crumbled rock face. There was a glint of light, and Sydney halted, her neck inches from the point of an iron blade.

Chapter 2

"Give it back," said the young man who held the sword, panting so hard he could barely keep it steady. Sydney's eyes slid up the blade to examine his face. His clothing was simple, dark and made for cold weather, but he was splendidly decorated in metallic jewelry. With his braided bronze hair and smooth skin, he could have been attractive. At the moment, however, his features were distorted by rage. His silvery eyes seemed to glow with fury. Sydney gaped at him, and as an afterthought she raised her hands into the air. His expression hardened further. "*Give it back*," he repeated, stepping closer.

"What—" Sydney finally managed.

"The amulet!"

"The...oh!" she said. She glanced up at her hand, and to her surprise, her fist was still clamped around the chain of the necklace. She held it out to him. His eyes flashed down to the necklace and then back up to her face, and he cautiously moved his sword away from her throat. In one quick movement, he darted forward and swiped at the amulet hanging from her fist. His hand passed through the gold as though it weren't there at all, and the necklace remained both untouched and undisturbed.

He started and looked down at his empty palm. "What..." he breathed, dismay dawning on his face. He looked up at Sydney with wide eyes, and his dilating pupils betrayed the torrent of emotion bubbling up inside him. She dropped the necklace and leapt back, holding her hands out.

"I don't know," she said. "Take it, it's yours. I don't want it!"

His sword clattered to the ground as he scrambled to pick up the necklace. His hands moved stones and dislodged dirt underneath and around the pendant, but the amulet stayed exactly as it was. "No..." he said, clawing at the ground, but the amulet tipped untouched into the trenches his fingers dug. "No, no, no...*what have you done—?*"

He turned to her, and she shrunk away, faltering again under the force of his growing rage. "I don't know!" she said. "I don't...I don't even know where I *am!*"

"Liar!" he roared. He lunged for his sword and rose to his feet. "Unbind it!"

"Un—what?"

"Undo what you've done, witch!"

"I didn't *do* anything!" she said, her voice rising in pitch as he stepped towards her. "I was just going for a walk, and—"

He charged, and she shrieked, falling backwards into the water. He stood over her, resting the tip of his sword in the hollow of her collarbone. "Make it physical again," he commanded, "or I will *make* you do it."

"I don't know how, damn it!" she said. The expletive took him aback, and his face paled.

"Should you curse like that in the mountains?" he asked, glancing around.

"I'm not supposed to *be* in the mountains!" Sydney said. "There aren't any mountains where I live! I was—I was at the river, and it was a nice, easy river, and I saw that *stupid* necklace, and I just thought...I thought I'd take it back to the moron who lost it. That's *all!*"

She mumbled another string of obscenities and threw her arms over her face. The young man grimaced down at her, thrown off by her nonchalant swearing and pitiful display. He glanced around again and moved his sword away. "I don't believe you," he said, lowering himself slightly, "but if you agree to fix it, I will let you stand."

She remained motionless. "How am I supposed to fix something you can't even touch?"

"*You* can touch it," he retorted.

"So?"

"Stand up and...at least *try* something," he said with exasperation. She scowled and stayed where she was. Losing patience, he reached out to grab her arm and haul her to her feet. As with the amulet, his hand passed through her body, disappearing beneath her skin as if she were made of fog. He gasped. "A spirit!"

"What?" Sydney asked, peeking out from beneath her arms.

"You're a spirit!" he repeated. "You...how dare you take a human form! Was it your intention to draw me into the water? Is this an illusion intended to end in my death?"

Sydney stared up at him in disbelief. "I don't even know what you're talking about anymore," she said.

"Where is my real amulet?" he asked, growing aggressive again.

"It's over there!" She pointed at the shore.

"You're lying!"

"What do you want me to tell you?" she asked. "I grabbed the necklace, I fell in the river, and now you're calling me a ghost. I have *no idea* what's happening right now."

"Stop with this act!" he said, glaring down at her. "You can't believe me stupid enough to confuse you for a ghost. The dead are mindless. Whatever your intentions, your story is *clearly* fabricated. You're obviously attempting to lure me into a false sense of security, and I will not be fooled! There is absolutely no doubt that you are a spirit, despite the quality of your human disguise, and any spirit attempting to steal my amulet has malicious intentions. Surrender—I will not tolerate any more of this." He moved his sword back to her collarbone, and she flinched.

"I don't know what else you want me to do! Look, can I surrender any more than this?"

"Reveal your intentions."

"My intentions are to not get killed by a lunatic who thinks I'm a—a spirit or whatever."

The man narrowed his eyes. "Your feigned ignorance is beginning to insult me."

"Feigned ignorance? Your...*craziness* is beginning to insult me! I'm not *feigning* anything."

"How do you expect me to believe you when you are so clearly incorporeal?" he said, moving his sword and thrusting his hand down into her stomach. It passed through her again, and this time, Sydney was watching.

"Whoa!" she squawked, scrambling away from him. She put her hands against her stomach and rubbed it. "How—am I dead? Did I *die*?" She leapt to her feet, frisking her body with frantic agitation. Water streamed down her back. "I don't feel dead...I feel normal! I can—I can feel water! Can ghosts feel wet?" She pinched herself and grimaced. "I can feel pain! I can't be dead...is this hell or something? Hey, touch my hand!"

She turned to the young man and held her hand out to him. He eyed her with open scorn and said, "This is pathetic."

Sydney's anger and frustration spiked. "Okay, look," she said, "how about you tell me what's going on instead of standing there like an asshole watching me figure out why my body's not *real* anymore."

"Your body is *real*, it's just not *physical*. Are you—there is no way you don't know this."

"Well, I don't."

They glared at each other for a moment, and the man exhaled through his nose. "Let's pretend I'm allowing a moment of credulity. How did you say this happened?"

"I *told* you, I fell into the river!"

"More specifically."

Scowling, Sydney elaborated, "I had a bad day, so I went home early and had a weird dream. I was thinking about it as I walked to the river, and when I found the necklace on a branch, it kind of drew me in, like it was...I don't know, related somehow. But when I grabbed it, I felt a weird sensation come over me, and my

reflection—" She stopped and examined the young man's face more closely. "It was you!" she said with a gasp. The oval face, silver eyes, and long, braided hair were all the same as those of the image she had seen reflected back at her in the river.

"Yes, it was me," he said, not bothering to hide his irritation. "A bead had fallen out, so I was repairing it when a branch above me snapped and fell on my head. I dropped the amulet, and the next thing I knew, you had your hand around it and were careening down the river."

"That's not how it happened. It was just hanging in the water. Nobody was holding it or anything like that."

He scowled, narrowing his eyes as he considered her statement. He was caught somewhere between perplexity and disgruntlement, and he was clearly not pleased about it. Grimacing, he crossed his arms and returned to the rocky bank of the river, plopping down next to his amulet. Sydney watched him with confusion and growing indignation. He pulled a small bag from his rucksack and sprinkled a grainy white substance onto the ground, and then he took a short stick from the scabbard of his sword and began doodling in the dirt, murmuring quietly to himself. When he set the stick down and began to cradle his head in his hands, Sydney decided that he wasn't going to acknowledge her further, so she walked over to join him.

"It *is* my amulet. It's not an illusion," he mumbled as she sat a safe distance from him. "It's...how could this happen? I thought..."

"I can't fix it," Sydney said.

"No, of course not...you are far too dense...and besides, you clearly possess no magic, and sorcery could never...but *how*?"

A thick gloom settled over him, and it began to make Sydney uncomfortable. She cleared her throat. "So...what's your name?"

He looked up at her sharply, and she almost bit her tongue. After a second of charged silence, he replied, "It's very rude to ask that question."

"It's—what? Are you serious?" she asked.

"You cannot possibly be this stupid. How do you expect me to believe that you aren't acting?"

"How does that make me *stupid*?"

He paused and considered her expression, and then, shaking his head, he went back to ignoring her.

Sydney scowled, watching him with poignant annoyance for a moment before stating with a note of defiance, "My name is Sydney Armistead. I'm seventeen years old. My father's a Senator. *Nice to meet you.*"

The young man stared at her speechlessly. She held his gaze. Color rose on his cheeks, and he pressed his lips into a hard, thin line. "You'll learn not to do that once you've been cursed," he said. "*Do not* repeat your name aloud to anyone else."

"Why?" she challenged.

"Is this—do you really not understand the power you give to another person when you tell them your name?" he asked, growing exasperated. "Especially when you tell a person who's obviously endowed with magic!"

"There's no such thing."

He gaped at her for a moment before standing and walking away. A moment later, he returned with the branch of an evergreen tree, still covered in green needles. "Watch," he commanded. Sydney rested her chin on her fist, donning the most condescendingly disinterested expression she could manage. He retrieved the stick he had pulled from his scabbard, drew a circle, sprinkled more grainy white stuff onto the ground, and set the branch in it. Whispering to himself, he tapped it with the stick. It instantly burst into flames.

Sydney jolted upright in surprise. "What—?" she said. He glanced at her with a smug expression, and the fire extinguished itself as quickly as it had started. The branch remained unscathed.

"Magic," he stated.

"No way," Sydney said. He smirked as she tried to find something to say, and she eventually just closed her mouth. Finally, she leaned back and said, "Damn, where *am* I?"

His smirk slipped. "Must you curse so often?"

"There's *magic*!"

"Yes, there's magic," he repeated with a sneer.

"So, what...you're a wizard?"

His scoffed. "Don't be an idiot," he said. "I am a guardian."

"A what?"

"A *guardian*."

"Of what?"

"Just—of humans!"

"And you can use magic?"

"Yes."

"Then why don't you fix the amulet yourself?"

His face fell. "If it were that easy..."

"Well?" Sydney pressed, staring at him until he was pressured to speak.

"It's...not an easy object to bewitch," he explained. "In fact, it should be impossible to bewitch, except by divine providence. I cannot undo whatever has been done to it."

"So..." Sydney said, "wait, but what about *me*?"

"What about you?"

"How do *I* get fixed?"

"If I cannot make my own amulet physical," he said, "how do you suppose I can make *you* physical?"

"You mean, you *can't*?"

"Of course not. If this is not your natural state," he said, gesturing to her body, "then you have clearly been cursed by the same force that bewitched my amulet. It is beyond my power to help you."

Sydney opened and closed her mouth. "But," she said, "but how do I get home?"

"I don't have any idea where your home is," he said.

"You mean I'm *stuck* here?"

"That's a possibility."

Sydney stared at him dumbly. "But what about my uncle's dinner?" she asked. "What about my parents? My dad—what if they think I ran away?"

"I'm afraid they'll have to make do without you."

"But—no!" Sydney said, standing up. "There has to be a way back. There was a way here, so there has to be a way back!"

The young man stared down at his amulet with narrow eyes, concentrating on his thoughts. Sydney watched him, waiting for a reply. His silence was beginning to anger her when he finally spoke. "You will carry the amulet for me."

"Who cares about your *stupid* necklace!" Sydney said. "Were you even listening to me?"

"I'm telling you that I can help!" he responded with a waspish bite. "I am traveling to the west to seek sanctuary at the temple of Bayal. I cannot be without this amulet. It houses—it protects me from the influence of spirits and witchcraft, among other things. I *must* have it near me at all times. As for you, the Sibyl at Bayal will know what magic brought you here, and what will be able to send you back. Probably."

"Are you sure it'll work?" she asked.

"It is the only that *could* work, as far as I know."

Sydney considered the proposition and grimaced. With a huff, she sat down and flopped backwards, sprawling across the smooth stones of the riverbank. "Is it far?" she asked.

"Yes."

"How far?"

"Very far."

"And there's no other way?"

"No."

"...Fine," she said with a long sigh. "If it's the only way...I guess there's no choice. And I can't know your name at all?"

"No," he responded. "You may call me 'Our Redemption.'"

"No."

"What? What's wrong with it?"

She pushed herself into a sitting position and looked at him with a raised eyebrow. "What do you mean, 'What's wrong with it?' What kind of name is that?"

"It's a title."

"What kind of *title* is that?"

"The title of a *prince*," he said through his teeth.

"A prince?" Sydney repeated with surprise. "You're a prince?"

"Yes."

"...Oh."

Chapter 3

"Are you sure this is the only way?" Sydney asked, watching the prince survey a rocky crag. Their path thus far had hugged the forgiving banks of the river, but the prince was already dripping with sweat. Between his slender physique and pale complexion, it was clear that he wasn't used to any vigorous outdoor activity, much less mountain climbing.

"Yes."

Sydney stayed quiet for another few moments as he approached the base of the crag and began to search for footholds. "There were some smaller hills a mile or two back," she suggested.

"No," he said, pulling himself up onto a tall ledge with a number of pained grunts.

"...Are you sure?"

He turned and sat on the edge of the ledge, his lips pressed into a thin line. He set his rucksack on his lap and pulled out a rolled rectangle of tanned leather. "Come here," he commanded. Sydney obliged. A map had been burned into the leather, and the prince tapped his finger against the mountains in the top left corner. "This is where we are. The Lokalka mountains. Now look here." He tapped an island on the west side of the continent. "This is Bayal. This is our destination."

Sydney examined the map. "Why don't we go this way instead?" she asked, pointing to a valley that divided the mountain range. "It looks easier, and we might be able to take this river to the sea."

"You see this city?"

"...Urothal?"

"That is why we don't go that way. We must avoid humans at all costs, especially large settlements."

"Why?"

"I can't expect a spirit girl from another realm to understand our politics," he said, shoving the map into his bag and standing.

"It's a political issue?"

"Yes."

"I'm from a political family, you know. I can handle politics."

"If you couldn't accept the basic reality of magic without a show, you certainly won't understand the affairs of our kingdom."

Sydney frowned and watched him struggle with the next few feet of the crag. "Isn't it weird for a prince to be wandering alone in the mountains?" she asked as he dislodged a small avalanche of dust and rock onto himself.

"Yes," he replied, gritting his teeth.

"Are you really a prince?"

"Yes."

"But you have to avoid people for political reasons? That doesn't seem very princely."

"Why must you ask all of these *questions*?" he demanded. "I'm helping you. Where is your gratitude?"

Sydney frowned. "Maybe I would be more grateful if we weren't climbing mountains when there are easier and *faster* ways to go. I just want to know why you think this is the only way."

"You need only know that this path is the only safe path. Safety is our main concern," he said, and he slid down the short length he had managed to climb.

"If you're worried about safety, maybe you shouldn't be wearing fifteen pounds of jewelry," Sydney said. He threw down his hands and turned to her, fuming.

"Do you know why I am wearing this jewelry?" he asked.

"No. It's kind of ugly," she replied, shrugging.

"It's not supposed to be pretty! It's *iron*. Spirits detest iron. And the stones aren't just decoration, either. They help to deflect negative energy. I'm being quite practical and I intend to continue doing so, especially since you are now carrying my most powerful form of protection."

"Spirits don't like iron?" Sydney asked. "Why?"

"Iron is one of the few physical things that can kill a spirit."

"You can kill a spirit? Aren't they already *dead*?"

"You consistently confuse spirits with ghosts, and I'm not sure why. Ghosts are spirits, but not all spirits are ghosts."

"So...can ghosts die?"

He looked taken aback and thought about it for a moment, then shook his head. "Never mind," he said. He turned back to the crag and glared at it as though it represented the entire range of mountains that stood between him and his goal.

"We should stop worrying about the particulars of spirits and work on moving forward. It's getting late. Once we conquer this obstacle, we can make camp."

"Good, I'm hungry," Sydney said.

"I have no food a spirit can eat."

"You're kidding." He glanced at her with a deadpan expression, and her face fell. "What do I eat then?"

"Whatever spirits eat."

"What do spirits eat?"

"It depends on the spirit, doesn't it?" His tone was becoming testy. Sydney stared at him, her mood taking a depressing turn for the worse.

"I'm going to starve," she said, dropping her head against the rocky wall of the crag.

"You're not going to *starve*," the prince responded. "You can look around for something when we make camp."

Sydney sighed, pushing herself away from the rock. "Let's hurry up, then," she said. "There may be something easier upstream. I can go look."

The prince exhaled through his nose. "The farther you go upstream," he said, "the deeper you trek into the mountains. That is the domain of spirits, and where there are spirits, there are witches. As you have my amulet, I would prefer to avoid any confrontation with a witch at all costs."

"Witches?" Sydney repeated, cocking an eyebrow.

"Yes."

"What do witches have to do with *spirits*?"

"What sort of place have you come from that fails to teach you these critical facts of life?" he asked, turning to face her again.

"We don't *have* witches. I mean, I guess people used to think there were witches, but then we all figured out that they were really just eccentric old ladies."

"Witches are not eccentric old ladies here," the prince said with a hint of scorn.

"Yeah, I got that," Sydney said. "No thanks to you. I don't know shit about witches except that they use magic. Frankly, you might as well be a witch to me."

His eyes narrowed. "You would do well not to vex me," he said.

"Everything vexes you. This cliff vexes you."

"The word 'witch' has very particular implications," he said, ignoring her jab. "Witches are not human, although they sometimes look like us. Anyone who uses witchcraft is an enemy to corporeal beings and wishes harm upon them. They are the agents of the barbaric kingdom of spirits that would delight in the eradication of all humans and our civilization. To call a man a witch is to suggest that he is at best a brute and at worst a murderer."

"That wasn't so hard to explain," Sydney said under her breath.

"What?"

"So if you're not using witchcraft," she said more loudly, "then...what are you using? What's the difference?"

"The difference? Between my magic and a witch's?"

"Yeah."

"I use weardcraft. It's an entirely different class of magic."

"Weird-craft?"

"*Weardcraft*. I am a *guardian*, not a witch. I am loyal to the Guardian King and the physical kingdom over which he presides. Witches are the minions of the devious Witch King, who reigns over his phantom subjects from the heart of these mountains—*which is why* we will not go any further into the mountains than we must. We would be murdered in cold blood."

"So..." Sydney said, crossing her arms, "we can't go too far into the mountains because of witches, but we can't go near cities or people either?"

"Correct."

"But you won't tell me why we can't go near cities."

"There's no reason for you to know," he said, and Sydney could see his patience shorten in his expression.

"...So if you're a guardian and a prince," she said, changing the subject, "does that make you the prince of this whole land, or are you the kind of insignificant prince that rules over a little region inside a bigger kingdom?"

The prince glared at her, and it seemed as though he wouldn't answer. Sydney waited. Finally, speaking through his gritted teeth, he said, "I am a *real* prince, second son of the Guardian King and his fifty-second wife, Her Beneficence the Guardian Queen. I am endowed with divine magic, imparted to me by the gods themselves. You would do well *not to vex me*."

Sydney examined his face, which echoed the anger that had startled her so badly when she had first met him, and she sighed. "Are we going to climb this cliff or what?"

"Yes." Without another word, he turned back to the crag. Sydney pulled herself up to his level with little trouble.

"Let me go first," she said. He scowled but moved out of the way. After examining the rugged wall, she chose a strategic outcrop and began to climb. There were enough cracks and knobs to use, but the fear of falling made her fingers rigid and her body tense. Yet, somehow, her muscles didn't fatigue. She pulled herself over the lip of the plateau after ten minutes of steady climbing, exhaling slowly and feeling rather accomplished. Moments later, the prince's hand appeared, clawing at the rock.

"That was horrible," he said, wheezing. His hair and clothes stuck to his sweaty skin.

"And you want to climb over this whole range of mountains?" Sydney asked mockingly.

He threw her a scathing look, apparently too tired and short-tempered to dignify the remark with a verbal response. Making no effort to hide his irritation, he stood and hobbled away. "I thought we were going to make camp!" Sydney called after him.

"Too open," he responded without pausing. Several yards away and up a slight slope, pine trees began to pop up through the rocky soil, gradually thickening into a forest that swept up the side of the mountain. The prince trudged towards the woods, dragging his feet with fatigue. Sydney considered letting him find his own resting place, but to her surprise, he stopped at the edge of the trees and turned to wait for her. His scowl prompted her to join him.

"We could have made camp back there," she commented as they weaved through the evergreens. The prince's lips were set in a ridged grimace, and he didn't respond. Sydney sighed and allowed him to find a comfortable spot. He finally stopped on the surface of an exposed rock.

"Don't sit," he said. She rolled her eyes and slumped to the ground anyway as he began circling the area, gathering twigs. He returned to the middle of the rock and set them down. Kneeling next to them, he dropped his rucksack and pulled out a number of carefully chosen dried herbs. Mumbling, he set the herbs on the twigs and wrapped them up, tying the bundle with a strip of cloth. He shot Sydney a look and said, "Stand up."

"What are you doing?" she asked, moving out of his way as he began to sweep the ground with the bundle of twigs. As he swept, she felt a strange pull on her body, as though the configuration of her self was being physically or metaphysically distorted by the brushing of the broom.

"The world is saturated with spiritual energy," he said. "We must clean our space to claim it."

He set the makeshift broom down and pulled out the bag of grainy white powder, sprinkling it around the edges of the exposed rock. Sydney's body began to settle, but she still felt uncomfortable, as though she was supposed to have left with the dust he swept away. She watched him for a moment, trying to shrug off the discomfort.

To distract herself, she asked, "Can I look at the map?" He didn't answer, so she sneaked over and tried to reach into his rucksack. Her hand passed through the

tanned leather as she tried to open it, and her face fell. "Damn it," she said, and, after a pause, she thrust her hand through the leather and began to sift through its innards blindly. Most of the objects were untouchable. She grimaced, shifting her hand around until it came into contact with something that stung her skin. With a hiss, she withdrew her hand. There was a red welt where she had been stung.

"Be careful," the prince said as he finished his ritual and returned to his rucksack, plopping down next to her. "There are items in there that are meant to repel spirits." To her annoyance, he opened the rucksack without any trouble and extracted an elaborately decorated comb.

"Why can't I touch things?" she asked. "Is that normal?"

"I'm sure you can touch some things," he said, removing the braids in his hair.

"Okay, but why not *those* things?"

"Because you are a spirit, and most of these things have been altered by weardcraft. Often for the very purpose of *repelling spirits*, as I just said."

Sydney groaned. "Why does this have to be so hard?"

"Ask somebody who knows something about spirits."

"Like a witch?" He shot her a look, and she cocked her eyebrows with poignant derision.

"Absolutely not."

"Can you get the map out? I want to look at it."

"Will you leave me alone if I do?"

Sydney shrugged. With an irritated sigh, he stopped removing his braids and pulled the map out for her, setting it on the ground where she could look at it.

Sydney scooted over and began to examine it. "Where are we going, again?" she asked. "Here, right?" She pointed at the island labeled Bayal, and he nodded. Sydney looked up at the sky, following the vibrant colors of the clouds to locate the setting sun hidden behind the trees. "Are we going the right way?" she asked. He nodded. She looked down at the map and then back up at the sky, frowning. "Are you sure?"

"*Please* stop talking. I'm busy."

"You're just playing with your hair!" Sydney said. He exhaled through his nose.

"The hair that grows from the scalp is our most immediate connection to the divine," he explained, picking up the comb.

"What? No way...you do that every night? That must take *forever!*"

"Yes, of course."

"Does *everyone?*"

"Why would a commoner waste their time?" he said. "Only the elite are directly connected to the gods. We receive strength and wisdom through the crown of the head, so we must care for it accordingly."

Sydney stared at him for a moment, watching him comb through his long hair with practiced care. "...Whatever," she mumbled, shaking her head. She pointed in the direction of the setting sun. "Isn't that west? Because if it is, we've been going the wrong way."

"East," he said.

"West. The sun sets in the west, so that way must be west."

"The sun sets in the east."

"What? No, it sets in the west." He rolled his eyes and shot her a look, and she felt her face heat up. "The sun sets in the west!"

"The east."

"No, it doesn't!" She felt an unexpected wave of frustration, followed by surges of resentment. Seething, she looked from the prince to the sky to the map, then back to the sky. "The sun sets in the west!"

The prince looked at her with a raised eyebrow and an expression of reserved disdain. "Wherever you came from," he said, "it cannot be reconciled with our world. Your reality does not apply here, and it would do you well to get used to that. If it makes you feel better, you can go search for something to feed yourself."

Sydney shut her mouth and watched him brush a sweet-smelling liquid into his hair. She churned the statement in her mind, shifting slowly from outrage to distress. She imagined crossing a range of mountains while catering to 'Our Redemption' as he grappled with nature and performed hours of pointless rituals. It would be days and days spent avoiding people and 'spirits' with no obvious source of food or comfort. She would have to adjust to a land where the sun rose and set in the wrong directions and people refused to tell each other their names, and she would have to do it without a corporeal body.

"I'm not hungry," she said. As an afterthought, she commented, "The stars are probably different here, too, aren't they?" If she knew more about astronomy, she was sure the shimmering sky above them would confirm her fears.

The prince tied up his last braid. "I wouldn't know," he said. He paused and asked, "Do you sleep?"

Sydney sighed and shrugged. "I did before. I feel like I could if I wanted to."

"We will probably find out shortly in any case," he said. "My main concern, regardless of whether you do sleep or don't, is that you do not leave me. I do not know what will happen if that amulet is away from me for any length of time, but I don't want to. You must stay within eyesight of me at all times, at all costs." His expression was stern, but it also betrayed a hint of insecurity. Sydney noticed but chose not to acknowledge it.

"What if I have to...you know. Use the bathroom or something."

"That—if I'm asleep, it shouldn't matter," he said, growing pink around the ears. "You don't understand what it means to my safety. It *must* be near me always."

"Whatever you say." He hesitated, and she could tell that he was still uncomfortable with the idea of falling asleep without wearing his precious amulet. "Go to sleep," she said. "I'll be here. I have nowhere else to go."

"If you sleep, do not sleep deeply. We must be cautious of the night."

"Yeah, okay." It was too dark for him to see her roll her eyes.

Sydney expected the prince to fidget and complain about the hard ground or the cold air, but it didn't take long for his breathing to deepen. The day had exhausted him more than she'd realized, and even though she felt exhausted as well, her anxious mind kept her awake. She thought about her parents. Would they search for her instead of going to the dinner? Would they be angry that she had